

The “Epistolary Method” and the Rhetoric of Assimilation in Bacqueville de La Potherie’s *Histoire de l’Amérique septentrionale*

The representation of the Other in ethnographic writing from the Renaissance and Early Modern period has been the focus of much critical attention in recent years. Discussions on “early contrasts between the ‘decadence’ of Europe and New World ‘virtue’” in particular have contributed to the debate on the so-called myth of the Noble Savage (Chiappelli xix).¹ The purpose of this article is to consider the role of epistolary rhetoric in an example of early Canadian history, Bacqueville de La Potherie’s *Histoire de l’Amérique septentrionale* (1722), and in so doing, to contribute to the discussion on “the discursive nature of the new world” (Turner 10). The well-established epistolary practices used by La Potherie highlight and to some extent shape his representation of the new world. This effect is particularly evident in his descriptions of Aborigines and in his analysis of the role they played throughout the Iroquois wars and peace negotiations in New France in the latter part of the seventeenth century.

Alan Viala asserts that French epistolary writing is characterized by an underlying tension between reality and fiction (183): the letter is presented as an authentic document, but there is an element of fiction at work as well, inasmuch as the letter constitutes an exercise in rhetoric. My primary interest is in this rhetorical or “fictional” aspect of La Potherie’s *Histoire*.

Bacqueville de La Potherie (1663-1736) held various posts in the French Marine in the late seventeenth century and took part in Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville’s successful expedition to drive the English out of Hudson Bay in 1697. He went on to write an eyewitness account of that voyage, which appeared in the first volume of his *Histoire de l’Amérique septentrionale*.

Three subsequent volumes contain information on the governments of New France as well as descriptions of life in the colony and in Aboriginal societies. The bulk of the book, however, focuses on events of the second half of the seventeenth century: the military conflicts and the peace negotiations in New France which led up to the peace treaty of 1701, known as the *Grande Paix* or Grand Settlement. Although some of the book's material is undoubtedly based on his own encounters with Aboriginal representatives, La Potherie also borrows heavily from earlier unpublished accounts to which he had access while he was in New France, such as the journals of Nicolas Perrot which contained first-hand observations (Pouliot 422). Since these earlier accounts are no longer available, La Potherie's book has long been considered a valuable source of information on New France.²

While most of La Potherie's *Histoire* takes the form of letters addressed to various individuals, it undoubtedly targets a larger audience.³ Indeed, his "letters," like much French epistolary literature, may be linked to an ancient tradition of letter writing, most notably the Ciceronian model in which the primary aim of the writer is not to confide in a friend about personal matters but to address discussion of public topics to a wider audience (Viala 170). Like all writing about Canada during the French regime, La Potherie's *Histoire* was aimed at readers in France. Given that earlier texts from New France, such as Marc Lescarbot's *Histoire de la Nouvelle France* published in 1609, had a positive impact on France's commitment to its colonial presence in North America (Gilmore 525), it is quite reasonable to assume that La Potherie had similar designs in producing his own version of the "History of North America" (which in fact was limited to New France and only extended as far as Hudson Bay).

What is of greater interest to modern scholars is that La Potherie's *Histoire* was one of the first formal histories of the French presence in North America to include detailed descriptions of Aborigines. His descriptions seem to avoid both the myth of the Noble Savage as well as its negative counterpart, the "degenerate savage" (Beaulieu 10). La Potherie's account is certainly ambiguous and at times inconsistent: while generally steeped in the language of stereotypes prevalent in early contact literature—for instance, the "Savages" are frequently characterized as blood-thirsty, vengeful, and duplicitous—it also reveals a certain admiration for Aborigines. In some instances, this relatively positive representation is offered in contrast to the "corrupt ways" of the Old World (a familiar device in early contact literature), yet it is not to be confused with the image of uncorrupted inno-

cence which many equate with the Noble Savage. In his depiction of Aboriginals, La Potherie relies on the theory of human nature and self-love, or *amour-propre*, developed by the French moralist tradition. This theory would have been very familiar to his earliest readers since it was given wide circulation in French literary and social circles in the second half of the seventeenth century and well into the eighteenth century. In applying this view of human nature, La Potherie (like many Europeans writing about the new world) “construct[s] a point of view from which new world experience would be coherent and intelligible” (Turner 10-11). To put it in slightly stronger terms, he borrows from French moralist writers in order to tame the savage otherness; the result is what Réal Ouellet has described as “l’apprivoisement de l’inquiétante étrangeté [qui] se produit quand un ensemble de référents permettent d’intégrer métaphoriquement l’Autre dans son propre espace culturel” (“Sauvages” 121). Focusing on La Potherie’s epistolary method reveals how he frames his account of Aboriginals in terms that his audience, composed primarily of members of elite French society, will recognize and understand. My aim in analyzing the rhetoric of La Potherie’s *Histoire* is not to measure the accuracy of his representation of Aboriginals and New France, but rather to examine how his form and his audience determine that representation.

The theory of *amour-propre* developed by such writers as Pierre Nicole and Blaise Pascal in seventeenth-century France provided insights into the motivations governing human relationships in society, particularly the desire to exert control over others. *Amour-propre* was seen as a sign of the basic corruptness of human nature. Surprisingly, in its enlightened form, it could also be seen as a positive attribute, one that, according to La Potherie, was possessed by the military leaders of New France and their enemies, the Iroquois. (That such a vice could be seen as a virtue is perhaps less surprising when one considers the paradox of man’s “grandeur et misère” as described by Pascal.) The epistolary form present in three of La Potherie’s four volumes implicitly acknowledges the importance of *amour-propre* in the writing and reading processes, for the letter writer must flatter the reader in order to persuade him or her. This appeal to the reader’s self-image, which is of course a fundamental precept of rhetoric in general, takes on particular importance in the ceremonial rhetoric of epistolary writing. Examining La Potherie’s *Histoire* in the light of *amour-propre* reveals the extent to which this view of human nature underlies his epistolary rhetoric and thus shapes his representation of Aboriginals.

From Epistolary Rhetoric to the Rhetoric of Assimilation

In his preface to the third volume, La Potherie introduces the term “epistolary method” (a “method” he had already used in the first volume but had dropped for the second): “Je me suis servi de la méthode Epistolaire pour développer années par années tous les mouvemens de la dernière guerre qu’il y a eû entr’eux & nous, & nos Alliez” (3.ii-iii).⁴ Although there are other examples of epistolary writing during the age of exploration and colonialism,⁵ none seems as ambitious in scope as La Potherie’s. While presenting itself as history, La Potherie’s book is also a travel narrative, already well established as a “popular” literary genre by the seventeenth century. Moreover, there are elements of history, geography, anthropology, and linguistics, even though they bear little resemblance to the modern disciplines. For instance, at the beginning of volume III, he provides a glossary of Native metaphors and metonymies—“Termes et expressions des sauvages”—specifically related to war. The epistolary structure allows the author to stray from the chronological narrative and to tackle a number of topics in no particular order; indeed, one finds identical passages repeated in letters addressed to different individuals.

La Potherie’s use of the term “method” seems somewhat curious—epistolary writing is usually seen as a spontaneous form of expression. In fact, La Potherie’s text is not comprised of authentic letters in the modern sense. One might consider by way of contrast another epistolary text on New France from the same period, Lahontan’s *Voyages*, first published in 1702–1703. In a series of letters addressed to a network of friends and associates, Lahontan gives voice to his personal experiences and impressions of Canada.⁶ In La Potherie’s letters, we find virtually no personal reflections, not even in his eyewitness account of Iberville’s expedition to Hudson Bay. La Potherie’s “epistolary method” more closely resembles that of Charlevoix in *Histoire et Description générale de la Nouvelle-France* (1744), a work which, according to Réal Ouellet, owes more to rhetoric than to authentic epistolary communication (“Épistolarité” 184–85). Apart from a few ready-made phrases (such as “You see, Monsieur” or “As I mentioned to you earlier”), the only true epistolary passages in La Potherie’s *Histoire* are located at the beginning of each chapter, where one finds a kind of dedicatory letter combined with a preface. Some of La Potherie’s dedicatees occupy high places in society, in which case the epistolary preamble follows “the classical regime of dedication as tribute to a protector and/or benefactor (acquired or hoped for)” (Genette 118). Other letters follow a pattern that would

become more prevalent in the nineteenth century, when, for instance, “the addressee [was] more apt to be a colleague or a mentor capable of appreciating [the letter’s] message” (Genette 125). In letters that fall into this second category, La Potherie refers admiringly to the voyages and military exploits of his correspondents (1.2; 1.115-16).

In the three volumes of the book in which the “epistolary method” is employed, this rhetorical device engages the reader in a dialogue between Europe and the New World. While one must generally be suspicious of Native discourse relayed through the prism of European representation, the dialogue is not so much between Europeans and Aborigines, but between the elite of French society and the colonial representatives of New France.

La Potherie strives to position himself as a kind of mediator in this dialogue: “Vous me permettrez, Madame, de vous dire que je suis devenu un véritable Iroquois. Souffrez donc que je vous introduise dans le nouveau monde par la Lettre que j’ai l’honneur de vous écrire” (1.198). This discursive positioning is somewhat ambiguous: while he claims to be well acquainted with the ways of the French court, he refers to himself in several letters as a man from a New World (“homme d’un Nouveau Monde”). Little is known about his early life, and there seems to be some confusion as to his place of birth: according to Léon Pouliot in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, he was born in Paris (421), but La Potherie claims Guadeloupe as his birthplace and refers to himself as a “Caraïbe” (1.311). La Potherie also presents himself as an “Amériquin” (which at that time could mean a Native of North or South America) and even an Iroquois.

Through their strategies of address, the letters appeal to the manners of the French court, a place at first presented by La Potherie as the complete opposite of the New World. In this opposition one naturally finds a hierarchy that devalues the colony and its inhabitants at the expense of French society, but this is at least partially attributable to the strategy of *captatio benevolentiae* found at the beginning of each letter: in order to ingratiate himself with the reader, the writer humbles not only himself but that New World which he purports to represent. Indeed, he claims to have no greater ambition than to amuse his correspondents by distracting them momentarily from their more serious endeavours. La Potherie even goes so far as to admit that his account of the colony might be inappropriate, as, for example, in a letter addressed to a lady with refined literary tastes: “Que diront les Dames de la Cour, quand elles verront que je vous mets à la tête d’une lettre qui ne parle que d’Iroquois” (1.311). The letter is presented as repay-

ment for a kind service which the addressee has provided to the writer. If it were not so, taking up his pen would be an indiscreet gesture, in spite of its ultimate function of instructing readers in a useful and positive way. La Potherie's attitudes towards writing and authorship clearly belong to the French *ancien régime*: "Si vous ne m'aviez permis de vous faire la relation d'une partie de mon Voyage de l'Amerique Septentrionale, je n'aurois eü garde de prendre cette liberté" (1.1). Here he employs a well-known device of classical rhetoric (which the *captatio benevolentiae* depends upon): namely, self-effacement, a variation of the Ciceronian concept of *humilis*. The worthiness of the addressee must be asserted, in contrast with the letter writer's own unworthiness. Ultimately, though, it is the pact between writer and addressee that authorizes him to produce his account: "La reception que vous m'avez faite à la Cour a été si gracieuse, que je me croi obligé de répondre à toutes vos honnêtez par un trait d'Histoire qui regarde l'établissement du Nord du Canada" (1.139).

On a number of occasions La Potherie characterizes himself as an "Iroquois," undoubtedly in a playful reference to the cultural phenomenon of "ensauvagement," that is, Europeans "going native" or assimilating to Native culture.⁷ Although humble self-presentation belongs to the ceremonial aspect of epistolary rhetoric, it also partakes of a theme developed extensively by the French moralist tradition: the basic corruptness of human nature as reflected by its inconstancy. Within this theme, one finds such baroque motifs as mutability and metamorphosis, which La Potherie attempts to demonstrate by using himself as a case in point: "Vous avez été surpris sans doute quand vous avez appris ma metamorphose, ce que c'est que la bizarrerie & l'inconstance du cœur humain. Je suis presentement un Iroquois, & vous me permettrez que je vous entretienne de quelques faits qui regardent cette Nation" (4.83). It should be noted, however, that when he refers to himself as a "man from a New World," or even an Iroquois, he is not merely being modest or humble or suggesting that he is unworthy of his distinguished correspondent's attention; he is also presenting his credentials as an authority on the subject at hand.⁸

La Potherie's treatment of that subject had serious implications. Given the context of constant war with Aborigines and other European powers, it is not surprising that one encounters a propagandistic element in early French ethnographic writing. It is logical for La Potherie to address his letters to specific individuals linked to the Court who would be in a position to influence royal policy. A letter by the missionary Bobé addressed to the

Intendant of New France, included at the end of volume IV, commends La Potherie's *Histoire* as a political tool:

Vous voyez par là, Monsieur, que la lecture du Livre de Monsieur de la Potherie sera agreable au Public, & qu'elle ne sera pas inutile à ceux qui sous les ordres du Roi ont soin de ce qui regarde la Nouvelle France, puisqu'il leur fera connoître qu'il est de la dernière importance de prendre toutes les mesures convenables pour empêcher que les Anglois & les Iroquois ne débauchent les Nations Alliées des François, ou ne les engagent à se faire la guerre les unes avec les autres que pour ruïner par ce moyen notre commerce, & nous obliger d'abandonner le país, afin de s'emparer de l'un & de l'autre. (4.270-71)

This closing letter by Bobé displays an adversarial mentality that immediately strikes one as being at odds with La Potherie's more tolerant commentary on Aborigines. However, the negative characterization of the Iroquois nations and their English allies found in Bobé's comments is also evident in La Potherie's narrative and descriptive sections, though not in his introductory or epistolary passages, which tend to praise the Iroquois. This discrepancy may be attributed in part to the gap which exists between the writing present and the historical past. Epistolary writing creates the illusion of present time—both that of the writer and the reader. Given that a general peace had just been reached close to the time La Potherie completed the book, the more favourable representation of the Iroquois in the epistolary sections could be interpreted as a conciliatory gesture towards former enemies. Perhaps a more likely (if somewhat cynical) explanation is that the threat once posed by those frequently referred to throughout La Potherie's *Histoire* as "sauvages avides de sang" had been neutralized: since the Iroquois were no longer deemed a great threat to the colony's prosperity, the reader was now at liberty to admire their more "positive" character traits.

In any event, as Maurice Lemire has pointed out in his recent study of the literature of New France (107), La Potherie's book is less polemical than most, and at least attempts to present an impartial view of the New World and its inhabitants, as well as of events that transpired between the French and the Aborigines. However, certain comments on key French figures such as Frontenac do border on hagiography: "Il étoit l'amour & les délices de la Nouvelle France, la terreur des Iroquois & le père des Nations Sauvages aliées des François" (1.244). But is claiming that La Potherie presents Aborigines sympathetically simply an attempt to seek out "isolated bits of positive rhetoric within a context of overall negativity," to borrow a phrase from anthropologist Ter Ellingson (50)? There are in fact several examples of "negativity" both in the descriptions of peoples and in the narrative of

the wars and peace negotiations. It could be argued, nonetheless, that in the instances of tolerance or even praise, particularly of the Iroquois Nations, there is an underlying rhetorical strategy linked to the discourse of assimilation. Indeed, Ellingson himself, in his study of the early ethnographic writing of New France, has pointed to the existence of a policy of “‘Frenchifying’ the Indians by assimilating them as near-equals in what was effectively a French-Indian confederation, recognizing and promoting their ‘good’ qualities as a basis for the limited amount of political and religious tutelage they would need to share in the future developments of [. . .] the new Golden Age in America” (107). Such a policy is undoubtedly reflected in some of the literature of New France during that period of seemingly endless conflict and territorial struggle. In La Potherie’s *Histoire*, the epistolary format provides the means for a rhetorical version of this assimilation.

Each letter begins with a flattering portrait of the addressee. The epistolary method creates a mirror effect: not only is there this flattering image of the individual to whom the letter is addressed, but in some instances the content of the letter itself is adjusted to the addressee’s particular circumstances. For instance, in a letter to the King’s physician, La Potherie discusses illnesses to which settlers and travellers are prone, such as scurvy (1.189). In a letter to a lady of the court, he pleads the case for Canadian women, whose manners are not as bizarre or “sauvage” as one might imagine (1.366). In a letter addressed to another lady of the court, La Potherie attempts to smooth the transition from the discourse of polite flattery to a treatise on the Iroquois wars by providing a portrait of Mlle des Verchères, a fourteen-year old girl purported to have successfully defended her fort against an Iroquois attack: “Vous y verrez en passant un trait de valeur d’une Canadienne de naissance, dont les actions sont d’une véritable Amazone” (3.15). Finally, in a letter addressed to a notable member of the clergy, whom he describes as a “second Augustine,” La Potherie discusses the vital role of eloquence in public affairs before describing the impressive rhetorical skills of an Aboriginal chief acting as a mediator in the peace negotiations between the French and the Iroquois (4.83-84).

Once La Potherie has produced a flattering portrait of his addressee, he is able to point out certain qualities which Aboriginals and the addressee both possess: “Vous jugerez, Madame, par la lettre que j’ai l’honneur de vous écrire, de la délicatesse d’esprit des Peuples Alliez de la Nouvelle France, & de la bonté de leur cœur. [. . .] ces Peuples que l’on traite en France comme des Sauvages, méritent que l’on ait pour eux d’autres sentimens” (3.194-95).

La Potherie's praise of the French allies extends also to their former enemies, the Iroquois Nations, who constituted one of the greatest sources of disruption in the colony. Certainly La Potherie conveys the terror that must have gripped the early settlers of New France: "[...] rien au monde n'est plus cruel que la guerre des Iroquois. Le Païsan, ou l'Habitant ne mange pour lors son pain qu'en tremblant. Quiconque sort de son habitation n'est pas sûr d'y rentrer. [...] Le Voyageur ne va guerres que la nuit" (4.60). Yet one of La Potherie's stated ambitions is to rid his French readers of the prejudices that prevent them from fully appreciating the merits of these Nations. He expresses admiration for the Iroquoian peoples by characterizing them as courageous and therefore worthy opponents of the French: "Jamais ces peuples n'ont fait plus éclater leur valeur que depuis dix à douze ans, les François ont avoué eux-mêmes qu'ils étoient nez pour la guerre, & quelques maux qu'ils nous ayent faits nous les avons toûjours estimez" (3.2-3). This praise gives rise to an analogy: the Iroquois wars in North America are comparable to the wars with the English and the Dutch in Europe, in terms both of the heroic ethic displayed and of the political stakes involved (3.52).

The rhetorical aspect of these letters, which is to a large extent required by polite society and its protocols governing writing practices, creates an exchange in which La Potherie offers to share his knowledge of the New World as payment for services rendered by the addressee. This pact provides an opportunity to open up a dialogue between the two worlds, albeit one in which Aboriginal customs and thought are described by means of European cultural references. The use of European references to describe new worlds and their inhabitants was fairly prevalent in early ethnographic writing. Such references undoubtedly reveal a "need to rationalize New World peoples, to incorporate them into Europe's scale of values" (Dickason 55). Certainly these cultural references tell us a good deal about his readers. La Potherie wonders, for instance, what Cartesians would think of the Aboriginals' reverence of the beaver, which is at odds with Descartes' view of animals as purely mechanical beings. The writer claims to share this reverence, having himself seen evidence of their human qualities (1.133). There are also several references to classical antiquity in La Potherie's text: for example, the frenetic activity of the "Jongleur" (shaman or medicine man) is likened to that of Virgil's Sybille producing oracles (1.127); Aboriginals react to the arrival of a French ship in their waters as if it were a "Trojan horse" (2.137). These references are not surprising when one considers the

vast body of new world literature from the Renaissance and early Modern period which engaged in assimilations of Native peoples to Greco-Roman models of representation, thus evoking a kind of Golden Age; Montaigne's essay on cannibals comes to mind, for instance (Todorov 303). While La Potherie does not explicitly engage in such idealizing exercises, he does nonetheless hint at a past Golden Age for the Iroquois Nation from which they have already degenerated as a result of the arrival of the French:

On a crû avec raison que Dieu avoit rendu l'Iroquois superieur à toutes les Nations voisines qu'il a détruites, à cause qu'il étoit plus honnête que les autres Sauvages, mais à present il tend à sa ruïne, Dieu l'a abandonné aux François qui ont brûlé leurs Villages, pris ou tué leur Vieillards, & par consequent détruit leurs conseils, après-quoi le desordre s'est mis parmi eux. (3.15-16)

While one may be tempted to interpret this passage as proof of La Potherie's critical view of European incursions into the Aboriginal way of life, perhaps reminiscent of Lahontan's "accusation that the Savage had degenerated because of the European" (Ouellet and Tremblay 165), the reference to God puts La Potherie's position into focus: this is all part of His plan. In this respect La Potherie reinterprets events in the spirit of the Jesuit missionaries who generally believed that Aboriginals, particularly the Iroquois, were in league with the Devil unless, or until, converted to Christianity. Their suffering, according to the Jesuits, was merely a sign that they had been abandoned by God, who used the French as instruments of their destruction (Berthiaume 123). Such a passage is nonetheless fascinating as one is hard pressed not to read a level of ambiguity in La Potherie's views: to what extent does he actually share the Jesuit view of Aboriginals?

Certainly La Potherie's praise of Aboriginals can be attributed in some measure to the belief that they have been converted to Christianity and therefore somehow redeemed. Their natural goodness has been "perfected" by their new faith: "Je vous ay dit, Monseigneur, tout ce qu'il y a de bon dans leur maniere de vivre, la Foi n'a fait que perfectionner cet état de Sauvage" (3.40). La Potherie treats us to a number of "inspiring and edifying" examples of the sincerity and fervour of Aboriginals converted to Christianity: in two separate letters, for instance, he repeats the same anecdote involving the war chief Auriouaé who, on his deathbed, was reported to have expressed great regret at not having been present at Christ's crucifixion which he would gladly have avenged by scalping those responsible (1.358 and 4.91).

The notion that Aboriginals possess a natural goodness that can only be perfected by Christianity leads us to reconsider the popular concept of the

Noble Savage. Much of the debate on the usefulness or accuracy of this concept stems at least in part from confusion over the evolving meanings of the first term. “Noble” is generally understood to refer to a universal moral quality rather than a hierarchical distinction as defined by the system of social orders. However, during the *ancien régime* in France, the two meanings usually went together: the hereditary nobility was believed to possess qualities—moral fortitude and physical courage—not seen elsewhere. While there is evidence to suggest that during the early period of contact Aboriginals were often compared to the European peasantry (Dickason 144), La Potherie’s view of the nobility of the “sauvages” is not dissimilar from that of earlier writers of New France such as Marc Lescarbot who, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, was struck by the privileges enjoyed by Aboriginals, such as hunting, which in Europe were strictly limited to the nobility (Ellingson 23). There seems to be a general tendency among the writers of early travel narratives, whether they considered Aboriginals as peasants or nobles, to assimilate in some way Native social structures to the European social order.

Even in the graphic descriptions of torture and mistreatment of prisoners at the hands of the Iroquois (and these abound in La Potherie’s *Histoire*), he manages to reconcile the cruelty of the Iroquois with the claim that they deserve respect and admiration.⁹ The author formulates this paradox at the close of one letter: “enfin aussitôt que cette victime a expiré, ils lui arrachent le Coeur; ils sucent le sang, & coupent le corps en plusieurs morceux qu’ils mangent. Tel est le caractère de la plus redoutable Nation qui soit dans l’Amérique, qui d’ailleurs sont très humains & très généreux avec ceux qui deviennent leurs amis” (3.50). His analysis of the Iroquois’ treatment of prisoners is not at odds with the European view that the treatment individuals receive is determined by their rank in society: “[the Iroquois] mesurent la peine à la qualité, parce qu’ils disent qu’un Officier doit avoir naturellement plus de valeur qu’un simple soldat, & qu’il est plus capable de faire paraître en ce moment plus de courage; ils s’acharnent donc davantage après lui” (3.48). Certainly one must keep in mind that La Potherie addresses many of his letters to members of polite society for whom the realities of war are somewhat removed. He therefore takes into account the “shock factor” of his subject matter, all the while introducing a kind of relativism that allows him to find common ground for his French readers and the Aboriginals about whom he writes. In one passage, for instance, he describes the courage displayed by an Elder who is being tortured by his captors:

Nos Sauvages lui firent souffrir tous les maux imaginables, il endura tous ces tourmens avec une égalité, une presence d'esprit & un courage digne d'un Iroquois. [. . .] Cette constance & cette valeur ne tient point de la ferocité; il y a des Heros parmi ces Barbares, comme chez les Nations les plus policées, & ce que l'on traiteroit parmi nous de brutalité, passe pour vertu dans un Iroquois. (3.279)

Harsh treatment of one's enemies is presented here not as criminal or unnatural behaviour, but rather as a way of honouring the enemy by allowing them to prove their courage. In the minds of La Potherie and his readers, there is nothing inherently contradictory in the concept of the Noble Savage: all nobility is "savage," in so far as the original, primary function of the nobility was to wage war. The belief that cruel and inhumane treatment constitutes a badge of honour bestowed by one's enemies would not be so foreign to the aristocratic ideology of early modern Europe; even a certain degree of tolerance toward cannibalism may be attributed to the code of honour engrained in the social elite of the *noblesse d'épée* (Lestringant 81). Ultimately, the more positive aspects of La Potherie's representation of Aboriginals may be attributed to a militaristic rhetorical strategy, which consists of building up one's enemies in order to underscore one's own strengths. By recognizing the Iroquois as worthy and courageous adversaries, La Potherie could glorify the French military leaders and thereby contribute to the survival and expansion of the colony.

Character and Nation Building

In many instances La Potherie seems to withhold moral judgments on the Aboriginals, whom he portrays as extremely clever and subtle in their conduct, a characterization undoubtedly belonging to the topos of the "Reasoning Savage" which began to emerge in the seventeenth century (Ouellet and Tremblay 164). In these descriptions, the term *politique* is used to refer to their skill in conducting affairs throughout the period of conflict and peace negotiations: "Les Sauvages ont assez de politique pour ne paroître se défier les uns des autres, & sur des nouvelles qu'on leur annonce ils suspendent toujours leurs avis, sans témoigner qu'ils croient souvent que l'on ne dit pas la verité" (2.119). *Politique* implies, however, an element of deception, with negative connotations that are more fully developed elsewhere: "L'esprit du Sauvage est difficile à connoître, il parle d'une manière & pense de l'autre, si l'intérêt de son ami a du rapport avec le sien propre il est serviable, sinon il prend toujours la voye qui l'acommode le mieux pour arriver à ses fins, il fait consister son courage à tromper l'ennemi par mille artifices &

fourberies” (2.262). In spite of its negative connotations, being *politique* is recognized as an essential quality in conducting affairs of state, especially in times of war. Obviously it is not a quality to be wished for in one’s enemies:

Le Baron qui a été un des plus politiques Chefs de cette Nation [Iroquoise], nous a donné bien de la peine par toutes ses ruses & ses stratagèmes. Tantôt il étoit de nos amis, & tantôt il renversoit tous les projets des autres alliez qui ne respiroient que la destruction des Iroquois. On peut dire qu’ils sont extrêmement politiques, traîtres dans leurs mouvemens, & extrêmement orgueilleux. Ils ont beaucoup plus d’esprit que les autres Sauvages. Ils sont genereux, ils ont de la délicatesse dans leurs entretiens, ils parlent avec justice, ils sont insinuans, & il est rare qu’ils soient la dupe de qui que ce soit. (1.227)

But in European statesmen who are able to uncover the plots and intrigues of opposing nations, *politique* is a quality to be valued. For example, La Potherie begins one letter (4.193-94) addressed to the former French ambassador to Venice by praising the latter’s successes in dealing with one of the most *politique* and subtle nations on earth; this opening then allows him to describe the various machinations and stratagems employed by the First Nations of North America, especially the Iroquois. It is this element of deceitfulness that is tied into the theory of human nature and *amour-propre* developed by French moralist writers such as Pascal and Nicole.

The use of this theory to describe the machinations of the French and Iroquois constitutes one of the most intriguing examples of rhetorical assimilation in La Potherie’s *Histoire*. In references to the French court, La Potherie reveals a view of human nature that plainly relies on the French moralist tradition; its relevance to Aborigines is only implicit to begin with, but by the end of the book a full-blown comparison has emerged. First La Potherie describes the court as a dangerously deceptive place (“épineux” or thorny) (1.229). Later, in another letter, he sings the praises of a courtier to whom the letter is addressed; he does so by enumerating all the vices which thankfully the addressee does not happen to possess, but which are evidently all too typical of courtiers in general. Most notable among the addressee’s virtues is his love of the King which is transparent and selfless (3.252). In other words, he lacks the vices of other courtiers—disguise and self-interest, both products of that underlying and all-powerful force known as *amour-propre*. In another letter, La Potherie elaborates further on the nature of *amour-propre* in order to underscore the differences between human nature as described by the pessimistic moralists and the character displayed by the peoples of the New World, both French and Aboriginal:

C'est avec raison, Monsieur, que le Sage nous dit de ne nous point fier à nôtre Ennemi, il connoissoit bien le cœur de l'homme & savoir que les protestations d'amitié d'un fourbe sont autant de pièges qu'il nous tend.

Que vous dirai-je, Monsieur du caractere de l'Iroquois, il parle & pense tout autrement, il se méfie de tout le monde, & tâche de penetrer la pensée de ceux avec lesquels il a affaire, parce qu'il apprehende toujôurs qu'on ne lui fasse ce qu'il est prêt de faire aux autres.

Le Comte de Frontenac les connoissoit si bien qu'il ne se fioit à eux qu'autant que sa prudence lui faisoit découvrir leurs desseins. Toutes les Ambassades qu'on lui avoit faites jusques alors auroient flâté agreablement un cœur qui se laisse toucher par le doux poison de la vanité & d'amour-propre, mais il avoit trop de discernement pour ne les pas prévenir. (4.3)

In this passage we can see that La Potherie's praise of the Iroquois blends into that of Frontenac: both display an intelligence at odds with the self-delusion resulting from *amour-propre*. (In this respect, Frontenac stands in contrast to another French figure in the Iroquois wars, La Salle, who was blind to the plots being hatched against him and the colony [2.139], a blindness characterized by La Potherie as "surprising" in a French general.) The human heart, enslaved to *amour-propre*, puts on a variety of disguises in order to deceive others, a process which ultimately leads to self-deception. The individual governed by *amour-propre* becomes so used to disguising himself in order to fulfill his secret desires that he eventually becomes unrecognizable to himself. Neither the French nor the Iroquois have fallen into this trap; they are not the dupes of *amour-propre*. On the contrary, they display what the jansenist Pierre Nicole calls an enlightened *amour-propre*, for they use reason to accomplish their true goals, of which they never lose sight (Nicole 381). Although the theory of *amour-propre* developed in seventeenth-century France was used to explain human interaction in polite society, according to Nicole, even in times of peace men are at war with each other (382-83). La Potherie uses this theory to explain why the French and the Iroquois have been such formidable enemies. In short, Frontenac and the Iroquois chiefs display a type of thinking that, according to Pascal, is characteristic of the *habiles*, a term the moralist reserves for those few individuals who have reached a higher order of intelligence and intuitiveness. Such men never let others know their true thoughts, but exercise a "*pensée de derrière*" or hidden thought (Pascal 70). La Potherie uses the term to describe Frontenac: "Il ne falloit pas un homme moins habile que Monsieur de Frontenac pour réduire une pareille Nation sous l'obeïssance du Roi" (4.81). This is in contrast to the *demi-habiles* who not only underestimate their enemies but make the mistake of saying what they think, thereby

revealing their shortcomings. Both Frontenac and the Iroquois chiefs are presented by La Potherie as adept moralists, that is, intuitive readers of the human heart; they are skilful at exploiting the weaknesses of their enemies.

La Potherie's representation of Native character can be better understood in the context of efforts by the French to transform Native chiefs into French leaders. For example they tried to assimilate Native political structures to the European concept of power: "the French envisioned chiefs who would command and thus reject consensual politics and noncoercive power. The chiefs would become governors of petty principalities and agents of the French state" (R. White 145). This notion certainly accords with La Potherie's representation of the Aboriginal chiefs as worthy adversaries and allies, almost on an equal footing with the French generals. The reader is meant to come away with the impression that the French and Iroquois, although bitter enemies in the past, are poised to form the solid core of a new and enduring Franco-Aboriginal alliance in this New World configuration.

La Potherie's use of letters seems at first rather arbitrary and even insignificant. Yet the epistolary method allows La Potherie to deal with the difficult challenge faced by writers of early contact literature: that of finding adequate discursive means to represent the unknown. It allows him to establish a dialogue in which he presents himself as the spokesman for the Aboriginals, claiming to have been transformed into a veritable "sauvage." Through this dialogue, he can more effectively persuade his readers of the centrality of the Aboriginal peoples in helping to shape North America's destiny. Only later would historians move Aboriginals to the margins of the picture.

NOTES

- 1 Such studies include those by H. White (1976), Dickason (1984), Ouellet (1989), Todorov (1989), Delège (1991), Ouellet and Tremblay (2001), and Ellingson (2001).
- 2 There is a good deal of uncertainty surrounding the publication of this book: although La Potherie submitted his manuscript to the royal censor in 1702, he did not receive the *privilège*, or permission to publish, until fourteen years later, for the book was deemed to contain information of a sensitive nature that could help the English during the War of the Spanish Succession. In any case, the first known edition is from 1722, although an earlier edition may have appeared in 1716 (Pouliot 422).
- 3 Here I disagree with Yves Cazaux who, in his introduction to the 1997 edition of La Potherie's *Histoire*, claims that all the letters (except for a few clearly addressed to a woman) are addressed to an unidentified male correspondent who liked to travel (Cazaux 14). A closer reading reveals that La Potherie addresses his letters to several different individuals—friends, relatives, acquaintances, military men, ladies of the French

- Court, important government officials—some of whom he even mentions by name.
- 4 The volume and page references to the 1722 edition are given in parentheses. I have not modernized the spelling or punctuation.
 - 5 This would include not only works such as Lahontan's *Voyages* (1702-1703) and Charlevoix's *Histoire et Description générale de la Nouvelle-France* (1744), but also a large body of religious writing from the seventeenth century, including Marie de l'Incarnation's *Correspondance* and the *Relations des Jésuites*.
 - 6 For a detailed analysis of Lohontan's use of the epistolary form, see Réal Ouellet, "Épistolarité et relations de voyage," 191-97.
 - 7 La Potherie discusses this issue in another passage where he attempts to explain, and even sympathize with, the behaviour of Frenchmen who were reluctant to follow orders they had been given to return to Montreal: "La vie Sauvage est si douce & si tranquille, quelque penchant que l'on puisse avoir pour sa patrie, que rien ne pût faire impression sur leur esprit pour les faire rentrer en eux mêmes" (4.157).
 - 8 "Discursive authority in the early literature of travel [. . .] derives from a different source than it would in other forms of poesis—not from an appeal to higher wisdom or social superiority but from a miming, by the elite, of the simple, direct, unfigured language of perception" (Greenblatt 146).
 - 9 Although far less numerous, there are a number of passages where La Potherie points with approbation to similarly harsh treatment of Aborigines at the hands of the French. While describing the fate of Aboriginal allies who had strayed from the French (they had their throats cut or were burned alive), he writes: "C'est ainsi, Monsieur, que l'on est contraint en Canada de repousser le feu par le feu. Si le Comte de Frontenac en eût d'abord agi de même avec les Iroquois, il eut arrêté cours à bien des maux" (4.98).

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